

2023:1

doi: 10.24834/educare.2023.1.812

## Teachers of Swedish as a Second Language: Identity, Agency and Voice

*Åsa Wedin*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2992-0818>

[awe@du.se](mailto:awe@du.se)

*Boglárka Straszer*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0011-1689>

[bsr@du.se](mailto:bsr@du.se)

This article explores the professional role of teachers of Swedish as a second language (SSL). The study is based on interviews with highly qualified SSL teachers to examine their perspectives regarding their professional identity; the opportunities, if any, that exist for them to have agency; and the changes they believe would lead to them having a stronger voice. Findings demonstrate that their everyday reality as teachers makes their role in education difficult. One contributing factor is that principals and teachers of other subjects lack sufficient knowledge about second language students (L2 students), which makes it unrealistic to assume SSL teachers can lead the type of school development and organisational change that they require to establish a voice in their role. To strengthen their profession, SSL teachers require a new type of role, one in which they not only are experts in the field of L2-student learning and educational needs but are also trained in issues of leadership.

Keywords: Swedish as a second language, Swedish as a second language teachers, teacher agency, teacher identity, teacher voice

## Introduction and Literature Review

This study focuses on the professional role of teachers of Swedish as a second language (SSL) and draws on research on how SSL teachers and their students are positioned (Wedin, 2021a and b). In 1995, SSL was established as a school subject with its own curriculum for primary through to secondary school (Tingbjörn, 2004). The thinking behind the curriculum was that SSL students would gain both language skills and knowledge about Swedish (SNAE, 2019). According to the curriculum (SNAE, 2019, p. 274), SSL students should:

“...be given the preconditions to develop their spoken and written Swedish so that they become confident in their language skills and can express themselves in different contexts and for different purposes.”

This means that teaching is to provide students with the opportunity to develop their language for thinking, communicating and learning. However, second language students (L2 students) face the double challenge of both needing advanced skills in the new language and using those skills for learning in other subjects. This alone demonstrates the important role of second language teachers (L2 teachers), who often not only plan and to support L2 learning, but also to organise L2 students' education in ways that enhance both their learning of the language and their success in other school subjects.

As research has shown, SSL teachers face numerous obstacles and challenges. Lindberg and Hyltenstam (2012) highlight how the educational framework of SSL has political, cultural and social dimensions. Moreover, they underline the central role played by teachers of English as an L2 (ESL) in countries such as Canada and Australia, where students achieve good academic results. In their research, Hedman and Magnusson (2020, 2021) demonstrate how SSL teachers contested discourses concerning the low status of their subject. Further, the highly qualified teachers in their study underlined their expertise and maintained that students benefited from their teaching. In another study (Siekkinen, 2021), SSL teachers stressed that students perceived their subject to be both valued and prestigious. However, reports by the Swedish School Inspectorate (2010, 2020), the Agency for School Development (2004) and the Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) (2018a) have identified issues, such as for example vagueness and variation in the organization of education for L2 students, resulting in inequality in terms of educational quality.

In research on newly arrived students in Sweden, Högberg et al. (2020) demonstrated that although SSL teachers express great commitment to their professional roles, they also experience a lack of required support. The researchers further showed how the SSL teachers ran the risk of being overwhelmed in their professional role because of responsibilities beyond those expected of teachers. Svensson (2019), whose study focused on students seeking asylum in Sweden, found that SSL teachers lacked adequate support and often worked individually rather than collectively. Although appointed as specialists, they lacked formal recognition and support from the management that would enable them to be successful in their professional role. In contrast to the studies by Högberg et al. (2020) and Svensson (2019), the study by Wedin (2021b) focused solely on SSL teachers in Sweden and highlighted the obstacles and challenges they face, such as not being given voice in relation to issues of language in other subjects or organisation of education at the local level.

Lindberg and Hyltenstam (2012) stress that the successful SSL teacher needs to be adaptable, flexible, highly competent and pedagogically adept. Not only are SSL teachers trained to teach Swedish as a second language, but they are also taught the importance of both including issues of language in the teaching of other subjects and of collaborating with other staff members, such as other teachers (of other subjects), other SSL teachers, mother tongue teachers, and assistants in study guidance in the mother tongue (SGMT assistants). In Sweden, SGMT assistants play an important role in the academic lives of newly arrived students through helping them in school subjects by communicating with them in a language that the students understand and can use for learning.

The role of SSL teachers extends beyond teaching SSL. However, Svensson (2019), Högberg et al. (2020) and Wedin (2021b) show that the commitment of SSL teachers combined with the lack of support they receive from management results in their frustration. Leung (2012) argues that the nature of professional knowledge and professionalism among L2 teachers may shift over time as it is dependent on several factors, such as social and policy changes. Ganuza and Hyltenstam (2020) claim that the increase in negative attitudes against immigrants in the public debate in Sweden may negatively affect the implementation of education that is relevant for L2 students. Consequently, their professionalism can manifest itself differently.

In the center of the article is the professional role of SSL teachers in Sweden. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted, and an abductive content analysis was done. The analysis is based on perceptions of identity, agency and voice among SSL teachers to enable a focus on aspects of power. The article aims to investigate the tensions that exist between the expectations for SSL teachers and the conditions under which they work. The professionalism of SSL teachers can manifest itself differently, and the article highlights this issue. We suggest that there is a need for greater recognition and support for SSL teachers in Sweden to enable them to be successful in their professional role and to provide education that is relevant for L2 students.

To better understand the tension and aspects of power in terms of the SSL teachers' professional role, interviews were conducted with six highly qualified and experienced SSL teachers who had worked in various contexts and had been influential in their role. For an analysis of the data that allows an understanding of issues of power in relation to identity, agency and voice among SSL teachers, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ 1. What do these SSL teachers reveal about their professional identity?

RQ 2. What spaces for agency do they perceive themselves to have?

RQ 3. What changes do they claim would strengthen their voice?

In the next section, we present our key concepts – teacher identity, agency and voice – and how they relate to power within the context of school. We then provide the framework of the study, after which we present the design of the study, followed by the findings. Finally, the article culminates with conclusions and a discussion of implications.

## **Theoretical Frames**

The study adopts a critical perspective on language and education through its focus on issues of identity, agency and voice to allow for a better understanding of power relations in terms of the complexity of the SSL teacher's role. The importance of considering the question of teacher identity in relation to language and education has been stressed by, for example, Cummins (2000), Fairclough (1989/2001), Gee (2000) and Wedin (2020). In line with Foucault (2000, 2008), critically oriented researchers have debated the notion of identity. Researchers such as Fairclough (1989/2001), Gee (2000) and Ivanič (1998) have studied identity in education from a critical

perspective and have argued that people have multiple identities that are ambiguous and unstable, and that are related to questions of power distribution. According to McLaughlin (2012), power affects the opportunity of the individual to choose different identities. Indeed, they may experience “a stigmatized, devalued identity imposed on them from which it is not easy to escape” (McLaughlin, 2012, p. 3). Specific for this study, identity is understood to be multiple, unstable and varying. The use of agency may imply an understanding of agency as being dynamic and fluid and as developing in social interaction. As Ahearn (2001) puts it, “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (p. 112; see also Vitanova et al., 2015). Research on teacher agency, such as that by Priestly et al. (2015), usually focuses on how teachers work in practice and engage with policy. In the present study, teacher agency is to be understood as opportunities teachers have to act. The analysis is based on what teachers reveal about their perceived space for agency as resulting from power relations and institutional structures. Accordingly, voice is used to analyse what changes SSL teachers believe would strengthen their opportunities to be heard. The concept of *voice* has been used in relation to writing by, for example, Hyland (2008) and McKenna et al. (2020). The latter use voice in relation to children’s writing as “a way to convey ideas, feelings, or information that is unique or authentic to the writer” (p. 807). Here, however, voice relates to power and to the right to express oneself and, consequently, be heard.

## Research Methodology

For this study, six SSL teachers were interviewed individually in Swedish. The interview design was semi-structured. The teachers selected were those that we, as teacher educators and researchers, considered both knowledgeable and influential within the SSL field, as well as influential in terms of their work with teachers, school leaders and other professionals. All six had at least 90 ECTS of university studies in Swedish as a second language, were experienced teachers (with between 6 and 30 years teaching) and had held a leadership role of some kind at a local school or at municipal level, including matters relating to the organization of education. At the time of the interviews, they were overseeing the professional development of other teachers, were leaders at the local level, and had worked with in-service training for colleagues or in the role of educational advisors at the national level. Several had established national networks for SSL teachers and had published books, book chapters and debate articles, and had worked with the development of local and national policy documents. They had worked predominantly in primary and secondary schools (in Sweden,

*grund- och gymnasieskola*), although four had also worked within adult education and at preschools. For ethical reasons, no more information will be provided about the individual teachers; henceforth, we shall refer to them as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, and so on.

The study obtained written, informed consent from the teachers, and all material was processed and stored following the Data Security Plan of Dalarna University and in accordance with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, EUR-lex, 2016/679). There were four hours of interview recordings, which were subsequently transcribed by the authors. The excerpts used in this article are our translations into English. The transcripts were adapted to written language norms to facilitate reading, with repetitions and humming indicated, but pauses omitted. The researchers used (...) to denote omitted talk and [ ] for additional comments and extralinguistic features, such as laughing [laughs].

Teachers were asked about their teaching background, their views on the professional role of SSL teachers (both their own views and views in general) in relation to issues of responsibility and collaboration, and problems that they had encountered in their role, including during their work with other teachers. They were also asked to share best practices, positive examples of and ideas for change, and their views on the general status of the SSL teacher. We also asked them about SSL teacher education programmes. The interviews were conducted by the second author.

The study structured and grouped its data according to issues of *teacher identity*, *teacher agency* and *teacher voice*, which are interrelated. For teacher identity (RQ 1), we placed examples of how teachers perceive their professional role when it comes to responsibility, qualifications and relations to other school staff. For teacher agency (RQ 2), we looked at how the teachers talked about their perceived space for agency in their professional role in relation to status and power relations. Teacher voice (RQ 3) was identified by how teachers talked about when, and to what extent, they perceived they had opportunities to talk and be heard.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data were analysed for content, and the analysis was framed by our focus on professional identity, agency and voice. The analysis was abductive, which means that the data analysis was combined with repeated re-reading of the empirical transcripts. Abduction allows the researcher to “on the one hand, dare to take the leap beyond pure distillation of facts, while, on the other hand, basing this on (already theory-laden) empirical findings”

(Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994, p. 45, our translation). This means that the analysis included reflection that moved between the theoretical analysis and the empirical data in a step-by-step process.

Step one involved reading the transcripts of the recorded interviews several times. In step two, information was analysed systematically, first in relation to each research question and then for each question to identify patterns and to form the themes presented in the results section. Using this step-by-step process, we identified sub-concepts, sub-categories and sub-themes to structure what the teachers related. Because there are no clear-cut borders between the three concepts of *identity*, *agency* and *voice*, there are no strict borders between the themes and presented issues. However, in the analysis we tried to identify parts that might help us answer our three research questions.

## Results

In the sampled data we identified the following central themes related to *SSL teacher identity*: a) the teacher's duty and role, b) the teacher's qualifications, c) the distinction between SSL and the school subject Swedish, and d) the importance of school leaders/management being well informed. Under the heading *SSL teacher agency*, the the following themes are presented: a) school culture, b) collaboration with school leaders/management, c) collaboration with colleagues other than SSL teachers, d) collaboration with SGMT assistants and mother-tongue teachers, e) digitalization, and f) perceived status as an SSL teacher. And finally, under the heading *SSL teacher voice*, the following identified themes are declared: a) teacher education, b) the status of the subject, c) collaboration between SSL teachers and d) financial resources. As can be seen, both collaboration and status are included under agency and under voice. This is because we find collaboration to relate to agency in connection to other colleagues and to voice as a way to strengthen SSL teachers as a group. Similarly, status is connected to agency by the way the teachers perceive their own professional role, and to voice through the status they perceive to be attributed to the subject SSL.

### *SSL teacher identity*

Identity issues in relation to the professional role of SSL teacher are central to what SSL teachers relate. The teachers referred to encountering both general and specific issues. Identifiable themes

are SSL teachers' duties and roles, their qualifications, the distinctions between the two school subjects, SSL and Swedish, and the importance of knowledge among school management.

The interviewed teachers described themselves using expressions such as mentors, enthusiasts, multitaskers and supervisors assisting students in all kinds of situations. They emphasized the complexity of their role, which includes helping individual students to find their place in school and in society at large, and helping their colleagues work with and support second language students. Some see their job as “very exciting, the best job in the world”, as Teacher 3 expressed, and something they chose to do. In particular, they highlighted that they furthered their education in SSL beyond the official requirements to be more qualified to teach the subject as they considered the necessary educational qualifications too low. Thus, this demonstrates that these teachers have a great interest in and enthusiasm for their professional assignment: educating second language learners.

The teachers raised two factors as being important for their professional success. The first is being qualified and having the skills and knowledge to teach the subject Swedish as a second language. The second is the need to have both the opportunity and the ability to work with other colleagues, such as school leaders/management, subject teachers, mother-tongue teachers, SGMT assistants, special needs teachers, school welfare officers and healthcare staff. SSL teachers indicated the importance of being able to plan in-service training for the whole school team. The identity of the educational developer is something that was talked about in various ways. Seemingly, much focus lies on the difficulties this presents. As such, they highlighted collaborative skills:

“[s]o, you [as an SSL teacher] may, than other categories of staff or other subject teachers, be able to work together with others” (Teacher 2).

Each of the six teachers emphasised the importance of knowing what conditions are optimal for L2 student learning in terms of being skilled and qualified to teach the subject SSL. For primary school, the academic credit requirements are 30 ECTS in the field of SSL, for lower-secondary school 45 ECTS, and for upper-secondary school 90 ECTS. Of these six teachers, three have a master's degree with a major in SSL. The six teachers communicated how teachers are assigned to teach SSL, despite not having the professional competence or qualifications to do so. Several teachers addressed the need to distinguish between the two subjects, SSL and Swedish, and that

both subjects require specialised competence. This is particularly important when both subjects are taught at the same time in the same classroom, sometimes by one teacher:

“You have to know what you can do together and what you need to do separately” (Teacher 2).

They also disclosed situations where the teacher is only qualified to teach Swedish, not SSL:

“They are also SSL teachers. This is their job, but they have neither the training nor the right teaching conditions” (Teacher 3).

Many of the teachers referred to instances where they have felt SSL to be secondary to Swedish and somehow stigmatised. The difficulties for the SSL teacher to uphold the knowledge requirements for the subject may lead to students requesting to change from SSL to Swedish:

“[the SSL teacher] does not have the same status as the teacher of the subject Swedish, which may be why students in SSL wish to transfer [to Swedish] too early” (Teacher 1).

Moreover, a number of them conveyed how the importance of their work is sometimes disregarded by school leaders/management. This was exemplified through SSL teachers sometimes being used as an extra resource or as a substitute for absent colleagues:

“Right now, I’m actually teaching English. This is something that you as an SSL teacher, that you may also be the one who [is told], “Oh, now we don’t have anyone here. Now you’ll be the substitute.” So, so this still applies to me.” (Teacher 6)

Thus, a complex picture of identity related to the professional role of an SSL teacher becomes apparent. The teachers highlighted their passion and enthusiasm for their job and the need for relevant qualifications, including the ability to collaborate. At the same time, they raised concerns about the low status related to the subject and its teachers, and how SSL teachers sometimes are marginalised and given work duties other than those for which they are employed. Moreover, the role of school management in relation to the SSL teacher identity was highlighted.

*SSL teacher agency*

Regarding the perceived space for *agency*, the teachers commented on what they call “school culture,” that is, collaboration with school leaders/management, collaboration with SGMT assistants and mother tongue teachers, digitalisation, and on how the role as an SSL teacher is perceived. They see school culture as being one factor that affects their ability to influence the organisation in terms of collaboration between different categories of staff. They regard collegial unity as crucial and link it to knowledge and awareness among principals, school leaders/management and other colleagues, in particular mother-tongue teachers and SGMT assistants. Furthermore, the participants alluded to the perceived status of SSL teachers among colleagues and digital tools that enable collaboration. Concerning one’s status as an SSL teacher and space to act, the teachers highlighted that it may be difficult when you are a newly educated SSL teacher to find a position at the school where there is already an established school culture. However, making both colleagues and school leaders aware of this may prove challenging.

Regarding the perceived space for agency, the SSL teachers emphasised collaboration with colleagues and school leaders. They saw timetabling as an organisational issue that needs to be dealt with and include SSL teachers. Time is central when it comes to collaboration among staff – if there is no time, then there is no collaboration. Moreover, SSL teachers highlighted the importance of collaboration with school leaders/management, as they play a crucial role in allowing time for teachers to meet each other so that they can plan together and give SSL teachers more space to promote collaboration. The teachers also talked about how school leaders/management need knowledge and understanding when it comes to the learning conditions for L2 students. One teacher gave an example of a principal’s response to changes to the curricula that were going to be implemented the following year:

“[mimicking] Yes, but then we’ll do that next year, but now we’ll continue like this”, which meant that SSL students would continue to be taught in the same classroom as students who studied Swedish [laughs]; then I feel that this is exactly where the competence is lacking.” (Teacher 6)

Furthermore, the role of school leaders is stressed in relation to SSL as a subject and to collaboration between colleagues:

“Principals who do not have resources to organise education in a good way, where beginners and advanced levels are mixed within the same group (...) I mean, then it’s easy to figure out that the quality of education won’t be high.” (Teacher 3)

Several of the teachers exemplified how awareness among school leaders/management has enabled them as SSL teachers to do what they have been trained to do. Good management created opportunities for collaboration and time for implementation, which had long-term effects. One teacher presented an example of a principal who had no knowledge about SSL but still managed to give the SSL teachers support. She related how the principal had searched the Internet for information and found a blog and a Facebook page for SSL teachers, which he informed his teachers about. She saw this as a good example of how even without necessary knowledge a school leader may search for information and thus be able to help teachers.

In terms of collaboration, the teachers highlighted that collaboration with other teachers is necessary, but that it takes time. As an individual teacher who finds the working load too heavy, you may see it as simply easier in the short time to work independently. The teachers underlined the difficulty of claiming that colleagues should collaborate and that timetables need to enable this without having the identity as the one who is responsible for L2 students’ education generally and for the development of the teaching staff. One of the teachers related that at one school where she had been working she had been responsible for meetings for planning purposes and for meetings for special needs teachers, mother-tongue teachers, SGMT assistants and SSL teachers. At her present school, however, she was not given such a responsibility and thus finds that she cannot fulfill her task to plan for the SSL students’ education outside the SSL class.

In terms of collaboration with SGMT assistants and mother-tongue teachers, all the teachers highlighted its importance as it means that support is available to students from different professional groups. Several of the teachers had arranged courses for SGMT assistants. One participant described what she had learnt from both SGMT assistants and from mother-tongue teachers:

“What I’ve learnt today is that students appreciate this [that I learn from them], and they see that I value those languages [other than Swedish that the students know]. This sort of spills over into other languages and also to other students. And I learned so much from those teachers about

what the school system is like and what differences there are, what you may think are students' expectations and what I need to be clear about and address." (Teacher 2)

Thus she has found that through learning from SGMT assistants and mother-tongue teachers she has developed in her own teacher role. One of the interviewed teachers spoke of how she, as school leader at that time, had fought to get a first-teacher position (*förstelärartjänst*)<sup>1</sup> for the mother-tongue teachers: "I managed and this raised their status, so wow!" (Teacher 1). As the first-teacher position is linked to holding a higher status, she felt that she had strengthened the status of all mother-tongue teachers. Furthermore, as mentioned above, digitalisation was regarded as important for meetings and collaboration since it facilitates communication online.

The teachers have many experiences that exemplify the importance of their perceived status and social position for their agency. Issues of agency relate to the position of SSL teachers, the subject of SSL and the SSL student group. One teacher described how she was met with doubt from her colleagues when she initiated a large-scale development project with her students:

"It will never work! You'll never get them to agree to it!" (Teacher 4).

This resulted in her becoming stronger in her leadership role as she managed to fulfil the project. However, despite the success of the project, she acknowledged feeling alone in her role as SSL teacher. Teacher 5 commented that the involvement of school leaders/management in questions regarding L2 students is also crucial when it comes to the status of the SSL teacher. Regarding classes in Swedish with a mix of L1 and L2 students, the teachers related there is a risk that SSL is perceived as having a lower status and that the role of the SSL teacher is to defend the rights of L2 students, particularly in relation to other teachers. This lower status can be exemplified by a lack of classroom space or a lack of a substitute teacher when the main SSL teacher is absent. Not only did the teachers stress social aspects, but they also underlined how social issues may be a heavy burden for SSL teachers, particularly the social reality of students:

---

<sup>1</sup> *Förstelärartjänst* is a category of teacher that secures a higher wage and greater responsibility than other teachers. Promotion to *förstelärare* may be based on the teacher's education or other criteria, as decided by the principal.

“Social aspects may pose huge challenges for the individual student as well as for the whole group and the teacher, and (...) some [students] perhaps don’t even have anywhere to live, which is very difficult. And this sort of thing doesn’t help you when you’re in school trying to learn. And then there are often specific cases of drugs and the like.” (Teacher 4)

Thus, the space for agency of SSL teachers is affected by many factors. Those that appear most prominently in the teachers’ accounts relate to collaboration with colleagues and the importance of competence and awareness among colleagues in terms of what L2 students require. The teachers present examples of how they have managed to effect change, particularly within their schools, and how they have been successful in their professional role, one aspect of which is creating good learning conditions for L2 students. An important factor for their space for agency seems to be collaboration with both school leaders/management and colleagues – what some termed school culture.

### *A voice for SSL teachers*

The third research question concerns possible changes the SSL teachers see as giving them more voice. To answer this question, the analysis focused on to what extent and in what aspects the teachers perceive themselves as being heard. The participants underlined the importance of teacher education and collaboration between SSL educators, the perceived status of SSL and the availability of financial resources.

Teacher education of both SSL teachers and other school staff members is deemed a noteworthy issue. The SSL teachers emphasised the multifaceted, relevant and important knowledge they acquired from their specific education for other school staff to understand the learning needs of multilingual students. Indeed, all the participants stressed the importance of multilingualism featuring in teacher education:

“It should go without saying that this should be included in (...) all teacher education programmes” (Teacher 3).

One teacher argued for greater teaching similarities between the subjects Swedish and SSL, particularly when it comes to upper-secondary school, stating she would like to see teachers with relevant education in both subjects.

In addition, there is the issue of the status of the subject SSL and claiming the rights of its students, which is relevant in terms of opportunities to talk and to be heard. As mentioned earlier, teachers talked about not being listened to in cases where they defended the rights of the L2 students. One SSL teacher described having to argue for discussions at staff meetings on subject-didactic questions and of being subsequently mandated to arrange such discussions. Another case where a teacher spoke up was when she gave advice to SGMT assistants regarding the choice of material that can be used to explain the current subject content. However, three of the participants viewed themselves as being unheard, and thus excluded. For example, a teacher conveyed her disappointment with so few of her peers using the official assessment tool, *Bygga svenska* (Building Swedish), which she thinks should be enforced by a national directive:

“I wished that a decision could have been made about the direction to take for all of Sweden when it comes to ‘Building Swedish’” (Teacher 1).

Moreover, she hinted at her lack of voice on this issue:

“As long as we have different assessment tools, we won’t have a common language for the discussion of students’ language development” (Teacher 1).

Therefore, she underlines the need for teachers to develop common ways to talk about students’ language development and that using a common assessment tool is one way to reach that goal. Nevertheless, she perceives that her voice remains unheard and thus asks for others to pursue matters.

The teachers claimed the status of SSL teachers might be raised through more collaborative work. For example, they referred to their own activities in an association for SSL teachers and in SSL teacher group chats on social media, and to a strong research field as examples of how they may gain a stronger voice. Teacher 3 argued that researchers in the field ought to take a more active role in the public debate to support SSL:

“I think that we maybe need to do that more our voices need to be raised even more.”

The issue of resources is but one that concerns the teachers: for example, limited resources prevent the grouping of students according to language level. They argued for the need for regulations in

the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and the School Ordinance (SFS 2011:185) that pertain to resource distribution.

In summary, although SSL teachers express intentions to claim a voice, one can denote a sense of resignation or disappointment from their accounts. While they point out activities through teacher associations and teacher groups on social media and provide examples of being heard, they also articulate a sense of helplessness when wanting to institute change. Requests for researchers to participate in the public debate, for official directives, for allocation of necessary resources, and for reactions from school leaders/management show that they may sometimes find their work as SSL teachers overwhelming.

### **The teachers' perception of the SSL teacher's role in Sweden: Summary of the Results**

The study found that the interviewed SSL teachers, successful professionals with leadership experience, present a complex picture of the SSL teacher's role. Although they are enthusiastic about their work, for example with "the best job in the world," they are simultaneously disillusioned by the reality of their professional role. This is in line with the research by Svensson (2019), Hedman and Magnusson (2020), and Högberg et al. (2020). The identity of the SSL teacher emerges as one who is a passionate professional, with high demands for quality in terms of both their own knowledge and that of their colleagues, and that required for their students' education. SSL teachers stress collaboration as an important ability, but they see it as problematic because it depends on school leaders/management and colleagues and their knowledge of L2 student education as a whole. The most contentious issue related by the SSL educators is the low status attributed to SSL as a subject, including their work being marginalized and devalued.

SSL teachers' experience of low status and their work being devalued affects how they talk about their space for agency. Despite having demonstrated agency in various ways, the participants communicate that neither they nor their teacher colleagues are heard. This is the case at both the local school level, where their work depends very much on decisions by school leadership/management and colleagues, and at the national level, when it comes to regulations and financial resources that they perceive to be inadequate for them to carry out their professional duties. However, their sense of resignation and disappointment is somewhat contradicted by how

they engage on social media and in teacher associations. A picture develops of teachers who express their voice, but who do not perceive themselves as being heard – at least not to the extent they believe necessary.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

This study found that issues of power stand out as important when it comes to the roles of SSL teachers and the extent to which they feel that they are being heard and have the possibility to act regarding their students' education. This study supports findings relating to challenges and obstacles found in earlier studies (Högberg et al., 2020; Svensson, 2019; Hedman & Magnusson, 2020, 2021; Wedin & Rosén, 2021) and in reports (Agency for School Development, 2004; School Inspectorate, 2010, 2020; SNAE, 2018a). The vagueness and variations in the organisation and teaching of the school subject SSL as reported by the School Inspectorate (2010, 2020) are also evident here in the variation and ambiguity expressed by the six SSL teachers. The study also found that despite the participants having previously effected change in education for L2 students, they still face numerous obstacles and resistance, which is also experienced by other SSL teachers. One significant factor they report is that their agency to act is dependent on the attitudes and knowledge of school management and colleagues towards SSL as a subject. This finding is consistent with earlier research by Hedman and Magnusson (2018). Our finding is also in agreement with Ahearn's (2001) view of agency as something dynamic that develops through social interaction. From the interviews, it is clear that power relations and institutional structures also play an influential role in SSL teachers' space for agency (cf. Siekkinen, 2012, pp. 211-212). As Svensson (2019) argues, SSL teachers may be perceived as "street-level bureaucrats" because they must work according to official directives while simultaneously dealing with an everyday reality dictated by factors beyond their control.

It is difficult to interpret the resistance SSL teachers seem to encounter when it comes to creating good learning conditions for L2 students. Although solid, credible, well-established and accepted research indicates some conditions to be necessary – such as the importance of using language development approaches in various subjects and that all teachers need knowledge about L2-learning, in line with official statutes such as the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and curricula (such as SNAE, 2019) – how this is implemented at the local level seems to vary (see also Sahlée, 2017,

pp. 14-19). The findings in this study are in line with reports by The School Inspectorate (see School Inspectorate, 2010, 2020), The Agency for School Development (2004), and The Swedish Institute for Educational Research (SIER) (2018), all of which report problems with equivalence and educational quality with education for L2 students. Explanations for this may be that the SSL teaching profession is less established than others, such as subject teaching and the teaching of Swedish, and that the teaching of L2 students barely features in the teacher education of other teachers (Hermansson et al., 2021; Wedin & Rosén, 2021). Another explanation might be that most teachers and school leaders/management have little experience of the needs of multilingual students and learning in an L2 setting. However, how is the role of the SSL teacher, which has been a teacher category in the Swedish school system for more than 25 years, not better established? And why is there insufficient knowledge when it comes to L2 students' learning? The Swedish National Agency for Education has invested significantly in the professional development of in-service teachers (Wedin & Rosén, 2021) and has published widely on the topic (such as SIER, 2018; SNAE, 2018b). It is therefore surprising to find that the teachers in our study, despite their enthusiasm and relative success, still express a sense of despair and remain overwhelmed by the burden of their work.

One way to understand the results of this study is to connect them to the participants' perceptions of their subject: SSL has a low status and is at times stigmatised. This correlates with the findings of Hedman and Magnusson (2020) and Siekkinen (2021) and is also in line with contemporary public debate and trends (see, for example, Ganuza & Hyltenstam, 2020). Significantly, stigmatisation relating to L2 teaching, its students and teachers has been reported internationally (see, for example, Talmy 2004). The findings and further the implications of this study can also be seen in a larger sociopolitical and educational perspective. It may be easy to place the responsibility for L2 students' weak academic skills on the L2 students themselves, such as demonstrated in the research by Parszyk (1999) and Runfors (2003), among others. Focusing on students' low proficiency in Swedish, and thereby placing the responsibility for their academic performance solely on them, implies that teachers and school leaders/management see no need for change, as exemplified by the principal who saw no need for change unless forced.

This study highlights one perspective on SSL that has been given little focus: SSL teachers' professional role, which includes aspects of teacher identity and opportunities for agency and for

being heard. The discord between, on the one hand, their clear enthusiasm and dedication and, on the other, their sense of being overwhelmed and of not being heard corresponds with earlier research from other contexts presented above. Our conclusion is that these teachers have a professional assignment that they are not equipped to manage. In a situation where school leaders/management and other subject teachers lack sufficient knowledge about L2 students' learning requirements, it is unrealistic to assume that SSL teachers can take a leadership role in the type of school development and organisational changes that are required. That would require a new type of teacher role – one of a teacher who is an expert in the field of second language learning, who knows the educational needs of L2 students, and who has training in the field of leadership. This would then be an expert role, similar to that of special needs teachers in Sweden – an expert who, in addition to their teacher education, has advanced training both in leadership and in SSL.

To conclude, teaching of SSL and the role of SSL teachers depend not only on the teachers' own competence and experience in the field but also on factors outside their area of responsibility, such as available resources, knowledge at management level and space for collaboration with other teachers. This highlights the need to consider power relations when it comes to the subject SSL and its teachers. Furthermore, our study strengthens the earlier described tensions relating to SSL and the professional role of SSL teachers.

## References

- Ahearn, L. M. (2001). Language and agency. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, (30), 109-37.
- Alvesson, M., & Sköldbberg, K. (1994). *Tolkning och reflektion: Vetenskapsfilosofi och kvalitativ metod* [Interpretation and reflection: Philosophy of science and qualitative method]. Studentlitteratur.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- EUR-lex, 2016/679. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679> - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu)
- Fairclough, N. (1989/2001). *Language and power* (2nd ed). Longmans.
- Foucault, M. (2000). *Essential Works of Foucault. Vol 1.: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Penguin.

- Foucault, M. (2008). *Diskursernas kamp* [The Fight of the Discourses]. Symposium.
- Ganuza, N., & Hyltenstam, K. (2020). Modersmålsundervisningens framväxt och utveckling [The emergence and development of mother tongue education]. In B. Straszer & Å. Wedin (Ed.), *Modersmål, minoriteter och mångfald: I förskola och skola* [Mother tongue, minorities and diversity: In preschool and school] (pp. 37–78). Studentlitteratur.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education*, 1(25), 99–125. <https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0091732X025001099>
- Hedman, C., & Magnusson, U. (2018). Lika eller lika möjligheter? Diskurser om skolämnet svenska som andraspråk inom det akademiska fältet i Sverige [Similar or equal opportunities? Discourses about the school subject Swedish as a second language]. *Acta Didactica Norge*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.5617/adno.5569>
- Hedman, C., & Magnusson, U. (2020). Teacher's act of legitimation in second language education in Swedish upper secondary schools. *Language and Education*, 34(6), 535–552. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2020.1775245>
- Hedman, C., & Magnusson, U. (2021). Researching the school subject Swedish as a second language and its agents: Revisiting and taking stock of an ethnographic project in four schools. *Languages*, 6(4), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages6040205>
- Hermansson, C., Norlund Shaswar, A., Rosén, J., & Wedin, Å. (2021). Teaching for a monolingual school? (In)visibility of multilingual perspectives in Swedish teacher education. *Education Inquiry*, 13(3), 321–337. [doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2021.1885588](https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2021.1885588)
- Hyland, K. (2008). Disciplinary voices: Interactions in research writing. *English Text Construction*, 1(1), 5–22.
- Högberg, R., Gruber, S., & Nyström, S. (2020). Teachers' work and positionings in relation to newly arrived students in Sweden. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 96, 1–8. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103156>
- Ivanič, R. (1998). *Writing and identity the discursual construction of identity in academic writing*. John Benjamins.

- Leung, C. (2012). Second/Additional language teacher professionalism: What is it? In M. Olofsson (Ed.) Symposium 2012, *Lärrrollen i svenska som andraspråk* [The teacher role in Swedish as a second language] (pp. 11-27). Nationellt centrum för svenska som andraspråk.
- Lindberg, I., & Hyltenstam, K. (2012). Flerspråkiga elevers språkutbildning. In M. Olofsson (Ed.) Symposium 2012, *Lärrrollen i svenska som andraspråk* [The teacher role in Swedish as a second language] (pp. 28-51). Nationellt centrum för svenska som andraspråk.
- McKenna, L. M., Morrison, T. G., Wilcox, B., Nixon, R. S., & Billen, M. T. (2020). Identifying elements of voice in first-grade science writing. *Reading Psychology*, 41(8), 803–820.
- McLaughlin K. (2012). *Surviving identity: Vulnerability and the psychology of recognition*. Routledge.
- Myndigheten för skolutveckling [The Agency for School Development]. (2004). *Kartläggning av svenska som andraspråk* [Mapping of Swedish as a Second Language].
- Parszyk, I.-M. (1999). *En skola för andra: Minoritets elevers upplevelser av arbets- och livsvillkor i skolan*. [A school for everyone Minority students' experiences of conditions in work and life in school] [Doktorsavhandling, Stockholms universitet] HLS förlag.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). Teacher agency: What it is and why it matters? In J. Evers & R. Kneyber (Eds.), *Flip the system: Changing education from the bottom up* (pp. 10-23). Routledge.
- Runfors, A. (2003). *Mångfald, motsägelser och marginaliseringar: En studie av hur invandrarskap formas i skolan* [Diversity, Contradictions and Marginalisations: A Study of how Immigrantship is Created in School.] [Doktorsavhandling, Stockholms universitet]. Prisma.
- Sahlée, A. (2017). *Språket och skolämnet svenska som andraspråk. Om elevers språk och skolans språksyn* [Swedish as a second language in school. On language use and conceptions of language]. [Doktorsavhandling, Uppsala universitet]. Institutionen för nordiska språk.
- Siekkinen, F. (2021). *Att vara och inte vara: Eleverpositioner(ingar) i spänningsfältet mellan svenska och svenska som andraspråk* [To be and not to be: Student position(ing)s in the field of tension between Swedish and Swedish as a second language]. [Doktorsavhandling, Göteborgs universitet].

Skolinspektionen [The Swedish School Inspectorate]. (2010). *Språk- och kunskapsutveckling för barn och elever med annat modersmål än svenska* [Development of language and knowledge among children and students with a mother tongue other than Swedish].

Skolinspektionen [The Swedish School Inspectorate]. (2020). *Svenska som andraspråk i årskurs 7-9* [Swedish as a second language in grades 7-9].

*Skollag* [The Education Act] (SFS 2010:800). Utbildningsdepartementet [The Swedish Ministry of Education]. Available at: Skollag (2010:800) | Sveriges riksdag (riksdagen.se)

*Skolförordning* [The compulsory school ordinance] (SFS 2011:185). Utbildningsdepartementet [The Swedish Ministry of Education]. Available at: Skolförordning (2011:185) | Sveriges riksdag (riksdagen.se)

Skolforskningsinstitutet [The Swedish Institute for Educational Research]. (2018). *Språk- och kunskapsutvecklande undervisning i det flerspråkiga klassrummet - med fokus på naturvetenskap* [Language and knowledge developing education in the multilingual classroom: With focus on science]. Skolforskningsinstitutets systematiska översikter.

Skolverket [The Swedish National Agency for Education]. (2018a). *Svenska som andraspråk i praktiken: En intervjustudie om hur skolor arbetar med svenska som andraspråk i årskurs 7-9* [Swedish as a second language in practice: An interview study on how schools are working with Swedish as a second language in grades 7-9] (Rapport 2018:470). Available at: <https://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=3956>

Skolverket [The Swedish National Agency for Education]. (2018b). *Greppa flerspråkigheten: En resurs i lärande och undervisning* [Grip multilingualism: A resource in learning and teaching]. Skolverket: Forskning för skolan.

Skolverket [The Swedish National Agency for Education]. (2019). *Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet (reviderad 2019)* [Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare (revised 2019)].

- Svensson, M. (2019). Compensating for conflicting policy goals: Dilemmas of teacher's work with asylum-seeking pupils in Sweden. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 63(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2017.1324900>
- Talmy, S. (2004). Forever FOB: The cultural production of ESL in a high school. *Pragmatics*, 14(2-3), 149-172.
- Tingbjörn, G. (2004). Svenska som andraspråk i ett utbildningspolitiskt perspektiv – en tillbakablick [Swedish as a second language in an educational policy perspective: A retrospect]. In K. Hyldenstam & I. Lindberg (Eds.), *Svenska som andraspråk: I forskning, undervisning och sambälle* [Swedish as a second language: In research, education and society] (pp. 743-761). Studentlitteratur.
- Wedin, Å. (2020). Negotiating identities through multilingual writing: Local school policy that opens up spaces for students' diverse languages. *Linguistics and Education*, 55, 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2019.100775>
- Wedin, Å. (2021a). Positioning of the recently arrived student: A discourse analysis of Sweden's language introduction programme. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 16(1), 69-86. [doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2021.1913174](https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2021.1913174).
- Wedin, Å. (2021b). Teacher professionalism at a time of mobility: Positioning teachers in the language introduction programme in Sweden. *Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies*. 15(2), 1-18. [doi.org/10.47862/apples.99557](https://doi.org/10.47862/apples.99557)
- Wedin, Å., & Rosén, J. (2021). Språkliga normer i lärarutbildning: Ett kritiskt perspektiv. *Acta Didactica Norden*. 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.5617/adno.8361>
- Vitanova, G., Miller, E. R., Gao, X., & Deters, P. (2015). Introduction. In P. Deters, X. Gao, E. R. Miller & G. Vitanova (Eds.), *Theorizing and analyzing agency in second language learning: Interdisciplinary approaches* (pp. 1-16). Multilingual Matters.